

Downtown Cathedral City: Vibrant, Compact Urban Oasis in the Coachella Valley

Cathedral City — located next to Palm Springs in the Southern California desert — is redeveloping its formerly blighted downtown into a pedestrian-friendly, economically vibrant, compact oasis within a traditional downtown urban form.

Public portions of the project, to open this fall, include a 68,000-square foot Civic Center, with a City Hall and a police station, presiding over a traditional town square with an interactive fountain, a landmark bell tower, and a redesigned Palm Canyon Drive (State Highway 111) and down-

town interior streets. These public improvements have attracted a variety of private development, including a multiplex theater complex

What's New

with an 16-screen, 70,000 square-foot theater with over 4,000 seats and 201,952 square feet of restaurant, retail, hotel and office uses.

Nearby will be a 40,000-square foot IMAX theater complex featuring a 250-seat large format IMAX theater, a campus of the University of California at Riverside, a computer graphics

training school, and a visitors' booth of the Palm Springs Desert Resorts Convention and Visitors Bureau, as well as more restaurants and retail uses.

New market-rate and affordable housing will also be located within easy walking distance of the new downtown and its many amenities.

Cathedral City, By the Numbers

Total Area in Cathedral City

21.1 square miles

Size of the Downtown

25 acres

Cathedral City Breathes Life into Its Decaying Downtown

In the 1930-40s, the heart of unincorporated Cathedral City was Palm Canyon Drive, a two-lane road connecting Palm Springs with the other towns in the Coachella Valley. As the Valley grew, Palm Canyon Drive became State Highway 111 and was expanded to a four-or-more-lane major arterial.

This expansion had the unfortunate and unforeseen side-effect of bringing the traveled portion of the highway too close to the adjacent development. Over time, the extra lanes, higher traffic speeds, reduced on-street parking, and narrower sidewalks hurt the storefronts and business vitality along Highway 111. As a result, Cathedral City's small downtown went into serious decline, marked by blight and boarded-up, vacant buildings.

The Process

In the early 1990s, Cathedral City decided to restore its decaying old downtown. Bruce Liedstrand, then City Manager and later the Downtown Project's Executive Director, brought in urban designer Michael Freedman of Freedman Tung & Bottomley, to study the problem and help find workable solutions. Recognizing the importance of community participation, the City appointed a 33-member Downtown Task Force to develop recommendations for restoring the "heart" of Cathedral City. Over the course of nine public workshops, the Task Force, working with Liedstrand and Freedman, studied the causes of the blight and devel-

oped a vision for a new downtown. "We can't just rehab here," Downtown Task Force Chair Dick Shalhoub said. "Almost everything has to be redone."

The Task Force's ambitious vision was to transform the fragmented and deteriorating downtown into an exciting and distinctive civic core with retail stores, restaurants, and entertainment venues, flanked by attractive residential neighborhoods located within easy walking distance. Its vision was to:

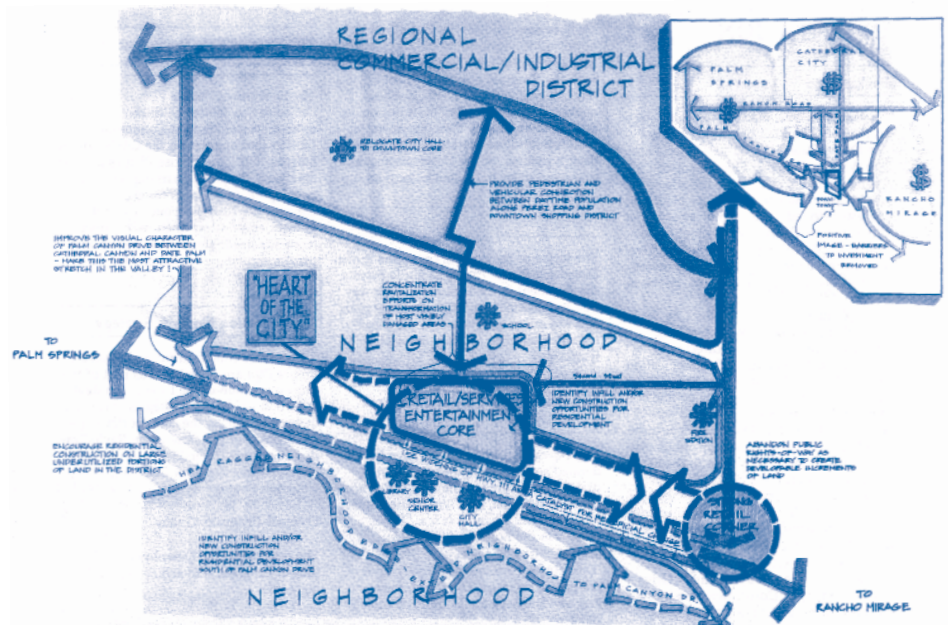
- ① "restore Cathedral City's historic Downtown as the social and symbolic 'Heart of the City';"
- ② "make Downtown a place that accommodates a rich and vibrant pedestrian environment with a wide variety of services, shops, places to eat, entertainment and cultural offerings,

appealing to residents and visitors alike;" and

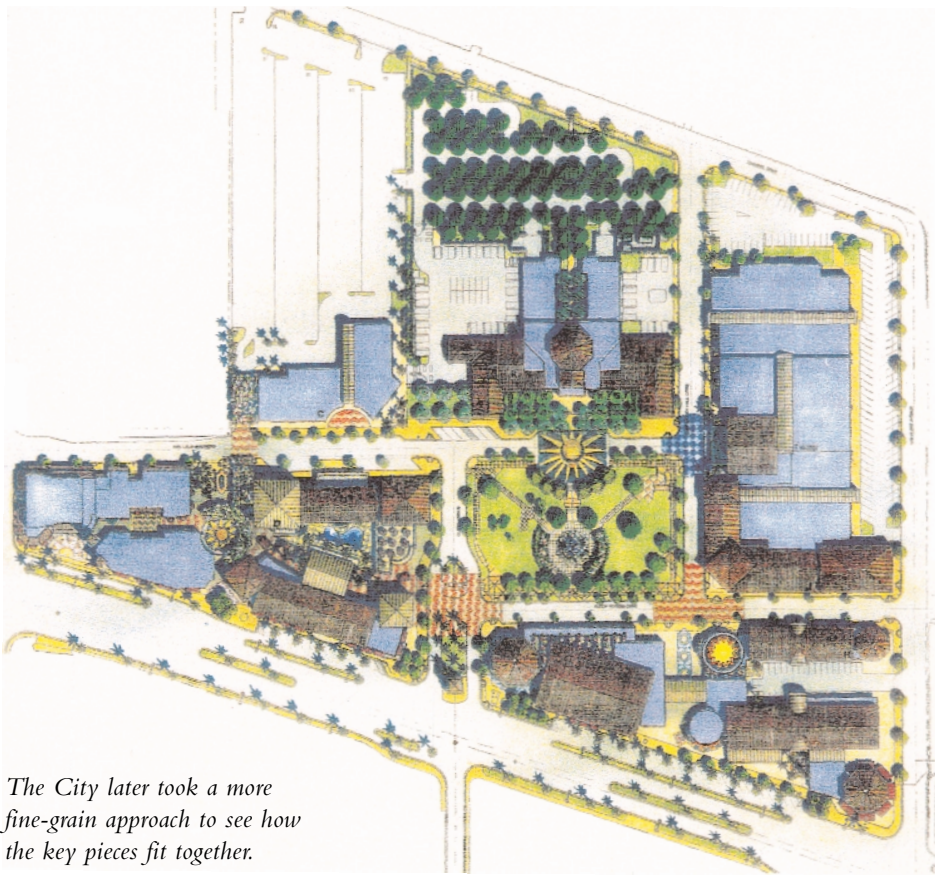
- ③ "make the portion of Palm Canyon Drive that passes through Cathedral City a 'grand boulevard' of international renown."

The Task Force proceeded to develop implementation steps for the Vision, including a Downtown Revitalization Strategy, alternative Master Plans for a new downtown core, a redesign concept for Palm Canyon Drive, and a preliminary Strategic Plan for Implementation.

This Vision was enthusiastically embraced and supported by the City, the community at large, and developers alike. "We applaud the City for its vision and commitment to create a town center that the entire Coachella Valley can be proud of," developer David A. Ghirardelli states.



One of the first steps was to help the Task Force understand how their downtown core fit into the surrounding urban fabric.



The City later took a more fine-grain approach to see how the key pieces fit together.

The Plan Takes Shape

In February 1993, the City Council approved the conceptual program developed by the Downtown Task Force. "This is something that has been looked at for fifteen years," Mayor David Berry said. "It's a vision of all of the council members, past, present, and future." As a next step, the Council directed staff to prepare a Downtown Precise Plan as part of the City's Zoning Ordinance. The Precise Plan is a tool to guide private development in the downtown that is consistent with the concepts, goals and objectives developed by the Downtown Task Force. Cathedral City's Precise Plan states that "the downtown will be the most compact and densely developed area in the city...the most public district in the city...[and] a unique city neighborhood."

It establishes new land use policy, parking policy, and development standards for downtown parcels. Developed by Freedman Tung & Bottomley, the Precise Plan includes:

- A community design framework featuring desert townscape elements derived from existing structures in the City;
- Development standards and design guidelines for the downtown core area and downtown residential neighborhood areas;
- Designation of a mixed-use corridor area;
- Guidelines for architectural character; and recommendations for site improvements, landscaping, signs, setbacks, and lighting.

The Plan

Codes contained in the Precise Plan, for example, outlaw curb cuts to individual businesses, and mandate that every building has an entrance onto the sidewalk.

Numerous street improvements are contained in the Precise Plan. The frontage of the new downtown along Palm Canyon Drive will be enhanced by trees, lighting, and other amenities, and protected from the moving traffic by a bay of angled parking.

"Many of the greatest streets in the world are boulevards with a grand scale in the middle, where through traffic moves freely, and a human scale at the edge, with local traffic buffering sidewalks, shoppers and shops," according to urban designer Michael Freedman, whose firm designed the street improvements for Palm Canyon Drive.

The new streetscape design for Palm Canyon Drive is already being implemented. The street has landscaped medians, additional lanes at main intersections to improve traffic flow, and accommodations for pedestrians, bicyclists, and public transit. "Though we have more lanes and can accommodate more cars," says Freedman, "the perceived scale of the street becomes much more intimate." Currently, 40,000 cars a day travel down Palm Canyon Drive.

Cathedral City, By the Numbers

*Average Minimum and
Maximum Temperature*

54.7° F. → 87.5° F.

Average Annual Rainfall
7.07 inches

Pedestrians Are the Focus of Cathedral City's New Downtown

A landmark **Bell Tower** will be located at the main entrance to the new Downtown, with a traditional design that mirrors the building forms, materials, and colors that characterize desert development. The Tower will mark the downtown as a destination, add character to the district, and enhance community identity.

Town Square. A key element of the new downtown, and the 'heart' of the city, will be the Town Square. This traditional public green, suitable for many different outdoor public events and functioning as the community's outdoor "living room," will be located on one acre in the center of the downtown.

Fountain. An unique interactive fountain will be the central element of the Town Square, with trellis-shaded seating, lighting, a sculpture court, a boulder garden for children, a staging area for performances, picnic sites, and other amenities designed to promote day and evening use year-round.

Store Fronts. The street fronts of all of the new structures that surround the Town Square will be devoted to small retail, restaurant and other pedestrian-friendly enterprises.

Pedestrian-Friendly. Cathedral City's new downtown "is intentionally planned to be a dense, pedestrian-oriented development, with stately multi-story structures not commonly associated with suburban communities," according to developer David A. Ghirardelli.



The new Civic Center will preside over the Town Square with its interactive fountain and attractive places to linger.

Special Features

It will be a walkable, human-scale place where residents and visitors alike can meet, eat, stroll, linger, shop, and play.

Mediterranean Theme. To reflect the statement in the Precise Plan that "part of Cathedral City's pride and identity lies in connecting new development and improvements to the beauty and history of the Coachella Valley," Cathedral City's new downtown will have a desert-inspired Mediterranean theme, marked by open yet wind-protected courtyards, covered walkways, colonnades, and arcades, creating a comfortable and interesting environment for pedestrians.

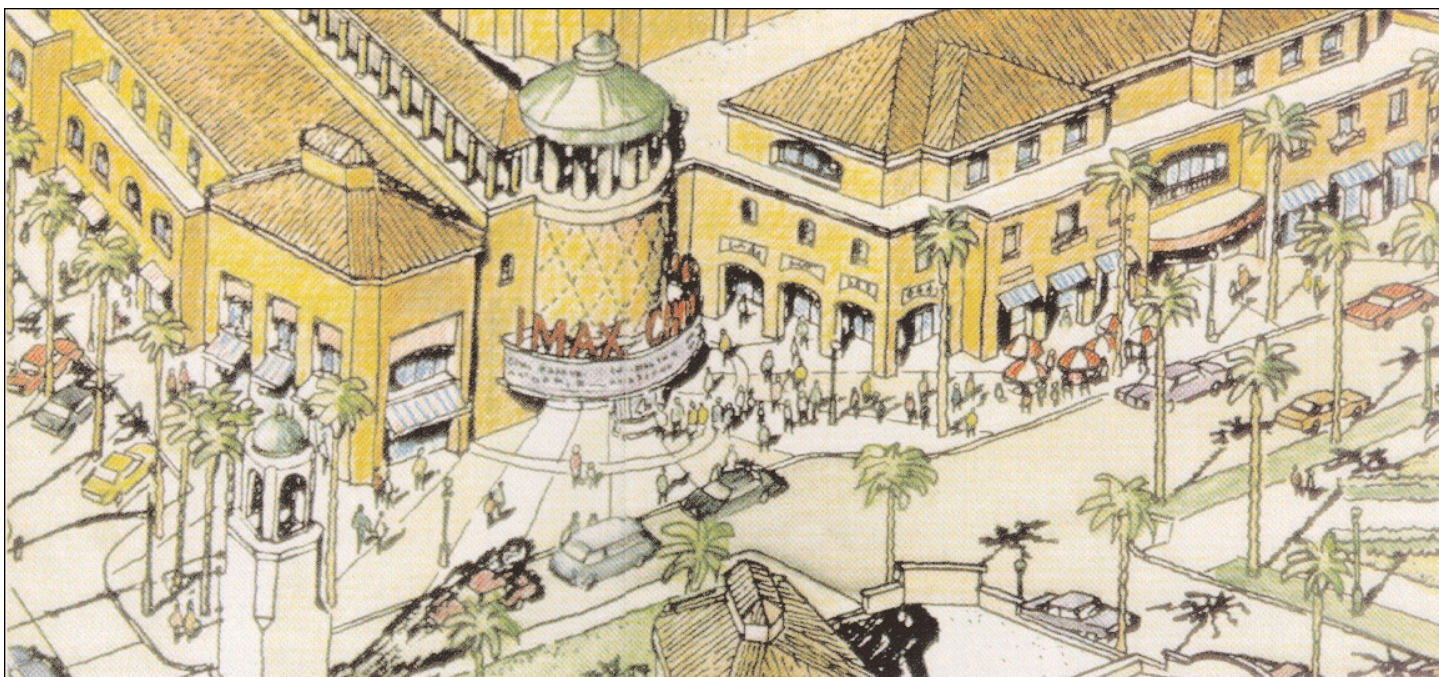
Features such as dynamic paving, splashing fountains, shade trees and desert landscaping will accent meandering paseos. Restaurant

seating and shop doors and windows will open out onto the walks, welcoming shoppers in a style reminiscent of small European villages.

Housing. Since a successful downtown contains places for people to live, the plan includes housing elements which will both bring people to the downtown to take advantage of the services and amenities located there and make the downtown safer by providing more "eyes on the street" at all hours of the day and night.

Hotel/loft apartments will be built as part of the entertainment center that houses the multiplex theater.

Additional housing — both market rate and affordable — will be developed within easy walking distance of the downtown core. In addition to being pedestrian- and bike-friendly, this will be the first housing development in the Coachella Valley to contain the density necessary to support future transit.



A 40,000-square foot IMAX theater complex will feature a 250-seat large format IMAX theater, a UC Riverside campus, a computer graphics training school, and a visitors' booth of the Palm Springs Desert Resorts Convention and Visitors Bureau, as well as restaurants and retail uses.

Good Design Makes Economic Sense

■ Environmental Benefits

By creating a vibrant, compact central business district in what was previously an auto-oriented and blighted area along Highway 111, Cathedral City

Project Benefits

is well on its way to implementing what the California Air Resources Board (ARB), calls "optimum land use strategies for air quality." According to the ARB, "land uses that help enable people to walk, bike or use transit, rather than needing to rely primarily on their cars for mobility, tend to be better for air quality."

The location of Cathedral City's new downtown, located right on a regional transportation spine (State Highway 111), allows people going to the downtown offices, public facilities, shops, restaurant and

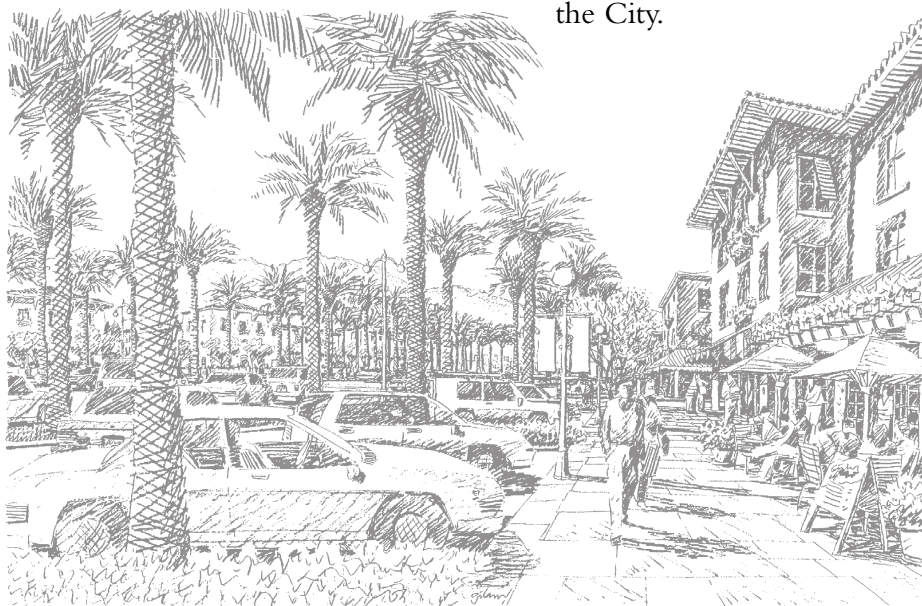
entertainment uses to choose from a variety of multi-modal transportation options (other than the automobile), including bus, bicycle and walking.

■ Economic Benefits

The initial public investment on the part of Cathedral City has already attracted \$40 million in private investment. Upon

completion of the project, the City estimates that it will have created a total of 1,900 new jobs, 1,000 of those being temporary or construction-related jobs, and the remaining 900 being permanent jobs.

The new regional entertainment uses, and the restaurant and retail uses in the new downtown are also expected to generate \$690,000 in annual sales and bed tax revenue to the City.



Finding the Money for the Downtown

Because Cathedral City is a modest-sized city with limited financial resources — like most California cities — it had to use a variety of creative techniques to find the money to revitalize its decaying downtown and implement its ambitious vision.

Funding

■ **Existing City Revenues.** One of the first things local government officials did was to analyze the City's existing expenditures. They found that capital improvement revenues were being spent on a variety of different infrastructure projects throughout the city. City leaders decided that they needed to set some priorities for spending these revenues.

The City Council adopted a policy that three-quarters of the capital improvement revenues would be allocated to a "savings account" to use in the downtown, with the

remaining one-quarter to be used to finance city-wide infrastructure projects. This "savings account" provided an early source of money for the downtown.

■ **Tax Increment Revenues.** The City's plan to fund much of the cost of the new Civic Center from its tax increment revenues was disrupted by the State Legislature's adoption of a major revision (AB 1290) to California redevelopment law. In the few months that remained before the new law's January 1, 1994 effective date, the City decided to act quickly. Working with a financial consultant, the City developed an interim financing plan for the Civic Center that "grandfathered" the project's financing under the old law. This gave the City an additional two years to put together a formal tax revenue bond issuance and still qualify under the old law's provisions.

■ **Regional Transportation Funds.** The City needed \$9 million to help fund the redesign and reconstruction of Palm Canyon Drive into a grand boulevard that improved traffic flow while still being compatible with the new pedestrian-oriented downtown.

The City was able to obtain half of the money it needed from regional transportation funds that were administered by the Riverside County Transportation Commission (RCTC). The remaining half of the money was not available from RCTC until future years, so the City convinced the Coachella Valley Association of Governments (CVAG) to loan the additional \$4.5 million out of its transportation funding reserves to RCTC to fund

Cathedral City, By the Numbers

Permanent Population
35,500

Seasonal Increase in Population
13,400

Median Income Per Household
\$34,859

Median Income Per Capita
\$14,553

the balance of the project. When the RCTC's future-year funds become available, RCTC will repay the loan to CVAG.

■ **Utility Fees.** The new downtown core needed utility infrastructure improvements that the City did not have the ability to advance the money for. The City therefore worked with the utility companies and the Desert Water Agency, and convinced them to install the needed improvements without the usual advance from the City.

■ **Creativity and Cooperation Key.** All of these elements were key to the City putting together the needed public funding for the project. The total investment in public improvements was \$53 million.

Without such creative approaches, and without the cooperation and support of local agencies such as RCTC, CVAG, and the utilities, the City would not have been able to fund all of the needed downtown improvements.

These public investments have, in turn, sparked an additional \$40 million in private dollars to be invested into a downtown that was not very long ago decayed, blighted and

Project Professionals

■ **Urban Designer:**

Michael Freedman,
Freedman, Tung & Bottomley

■ **Entertainment Center Architect:**

Richard Huelsman, MCG
Architects

■ **IMAX Complex Architect:**

Jean Fraley, Fraley/Stricker
Architects

■ **Civic Center Architect:**

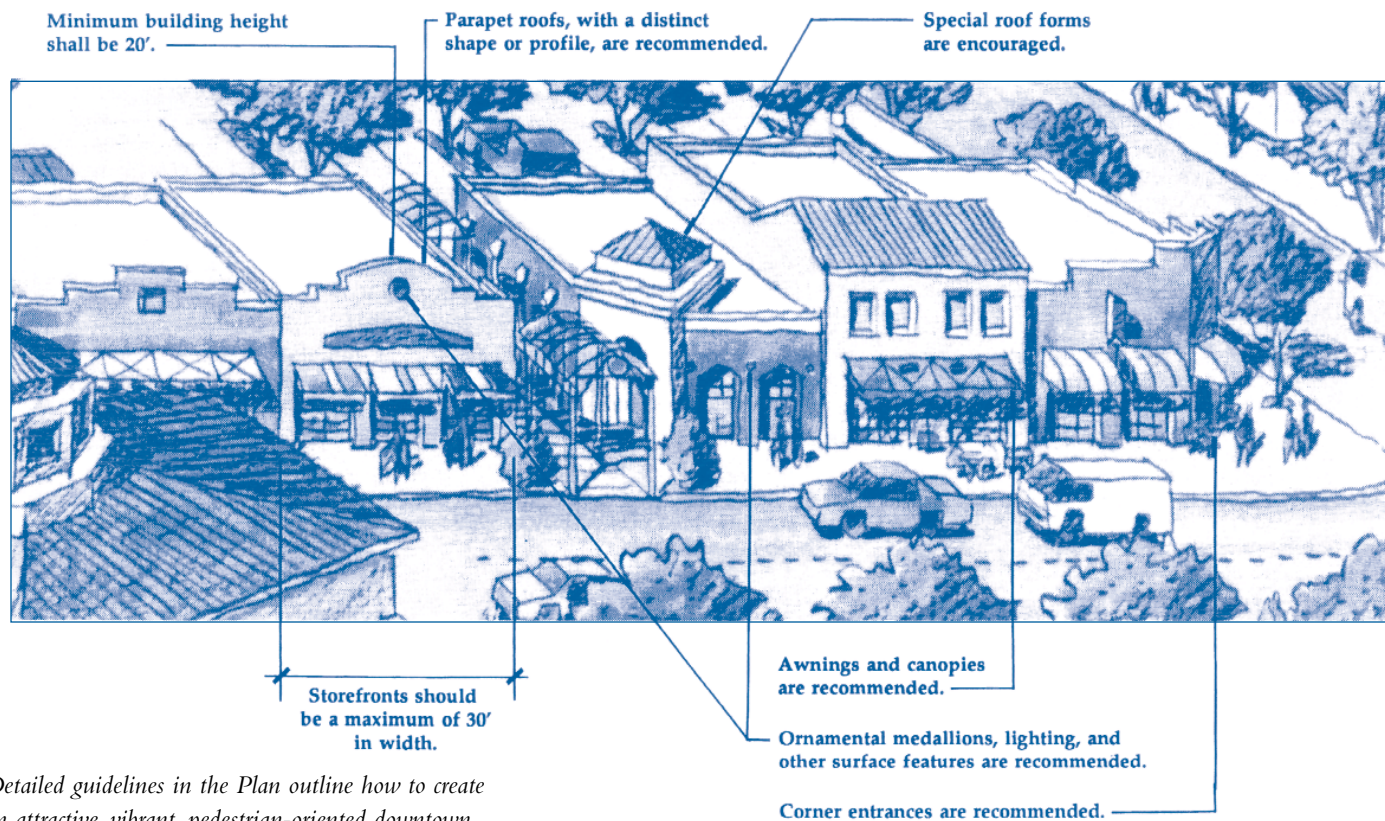
Robert Wood, MWM Architects

■ **Town Square Architects:**

Reuel Young and Tom Doczi,
Interactive Design Corp.

■ **Developers:**

Ventura Pacific Capital Co.
Selleck Properties, Inc.
David Ghirardelli, Inc.
Entertainment Leaders, Inc.



Detailed guidelines in the Plan outline how to create an attractive, vibrant, pedestrian-oriented downtown.

Making It Happen: Public Participation, Partnerships, and a Compelling Vision

■ **Public Participation**

Extensive public participation and a clear and compelling vision were essential to making this project a reality. The most important key to success was the City's decision to invest the time and resources in working with members of the local community to develop a collective vision for what the community wanted its downtown to become.

Understanding the problem was an important first step. Through a series of public workshops the City's Downtown Task Force worked closely with urban designer Michael Freedman to understand the causes of the downtown's problems and to identify the tools and opportunities to improve it. With that understanding, the Task Force

was able to develop an ambitious but achievable vision and the strategies for implementing it. "Once we had a clear vision that everybody believed in, the project took on a life of its own," says former City Manager and Downtown Executive Director Bruce Liedstrand.

Before a marketing plan could even be developed, the strength and clarity of the Vision had attracted an Imax Theater and retail/restaurant development. This, in turn, attracted multiple developers interested in building a destination multiplex theater and substantial additional commercial development. "The Downtown Vision was like a magnet for attracting resources," says

Liedstrand "We needed one entertainment draw to bring people downtown and we've achieved that and much, much more."

■ **Partnerships**

Partnerships, both planned and unanticipated, were also key to the project's success. One of the reasons that the unanticipated partnerships were so successful was the City's ability to be flexible. For example, the City was thrilled when the University of California at Riverside began to talk to them about locating a campus in Cathedral City. Although it was not a planned use for the new

Reasons for Success

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Creating A Downtown Neighborhood

The Cathedral City downtown project illustrates that regions can successfully undertake an integrated planning process to implement transportation, housing and community development initiatives resulting in improved quality of life and environmental benefits.

■ **Design of Highway 111:** The careful redesign of Palm Canyon Drive (State Highway 111) is a critical piece of this project's success. Urban designer Michael Freedman, of Freedman Tung & Bottomley, worked with Hans Korge, a traffic engineer, to determine how to accommodate Palm Canyon Drive's considerable thru traffic while still creating a walkable, transit-friendly local street environment on which local shops and restaurants could thrive.

Working in coordination with the region's transit provider, Sun Line Transit, Freedman and Korge redesigned the central portion of the road to contain four traffic lanes, separated by a tree-lined median, to handle the quick-moving regional traffic.

Then, at the edge of the highway, separated from the thru traffic by another tree-lined median, Freedman designed a smaller, local street environment to serve as a frontage road to accommodate local traffic. Diagonal parking along the shop fronts, a wide sidewalk and additional street trees further buffer the pedestrian from the moving cars.

This creative redesign allows Palm Canyon Drive to function both as a regional traffic carrier, easily served by local transit, and as a local shop-



Newly designed center lanes of Palm Canyon Drive accommodate traffic while a frontage road at the edge creates a safe, walkable environment at the site of Cathedral City's new downtown.

ping street with an inviting pedestrian environment.

■ **Housing in the Downtown:** The City clearly recognizes the importance of integrating its downtown, jobs, and transit with housing, particularly affordable housing. The California Air Resources Board reports that "providing an ample

Lessons Learned

supply of housing downtown and in nearby neighborhoods contributes to safer and more lively central cities. It also simplifies commuting for those people who live and work nearby."

On its way to accomplishing those goals, the City of Cathedral City estimates that ultimately 900 units of housing will be developed in the downtown and surrounding neighborhoods in the coming years, of

which at least 180 units will be affordable.

The City also plans to provide 100 units of senior housing in the downtown. For seniors and low-income families especially, making it easy for them to walk, ride their bikes, or take transit to the new downtown reduces their need to own or operate an automobile.

Thus, the location of housing along the region's major transportation corridor, adjacent to jobs and downtown shopping, restaurants and entertainment, will reduce vehicle trips over time while creating a safe, compact, pedestrian-friendly neighborhood.

■ **Public Participation:** The project would not have been possible were it not for the considerable effort made by the City to involve the public in the process and the resulting community participation.

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Don't Give Up: Change the Law If Need Be

As with any large-scale revitalization effort, implementation of Cathedral City's Vision for its Downtown had to overcome many obstacles. One "roadblock" was that Palm Canyon Drive was also Highway 111, part of the State Highway System. As a result, the street redesign had to meet the standards of the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) which has traditionally focused on designing and building freeways, not pedestrian-friendly city streets.

Challenges

When it became apparent that the City's vision for the new Palm Canyon Drive was incompatible with Caltrans freeway oriented design standards, the City decided to pursue realignment of Highway 111, in order to remove the downtown portion of Palm Canyon Drive from the State System.

Since the realignment affected adjacent cities, they were brought into the discussions, but after many

months, the cities were unable to agree on a new alignment.

In frustration, Cathedral City asked Caltrans for permission to remove its segment of Palm Canyon Drive from the State Highway System without realigning the highway in a way that was acceptable to the adjacent cities, but Caltrans said "no," that would be 'against the law'.

"We really needed that flexibility so we could build what we needed to build," explains Susan Moeller, Cathedral City's Downtown Redevelopment Director.

Cathedral City therefore decided to 'change the law.' Working with its local state legislators and a lobbyist, Cathedral City succeeded, and got the law changed for all cities along Highway 11. Now, Coachella Valley cities can request the State Highway Commission to remove its portion of Highway 11 from the state system. This allowed the City to redesign and build Palm Canyon Drive in a way that was both pedestrian- and transit-friendly.

Lessons Learned

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The 33-member Downtown Task Force and members of the general public participated in a series of nine community workshops facilitated by Freedman.

"Education was a key part of the process," says former City Manager Bruce Liedstrand. "We needed to first understand our problems before we could make any decisions about the solutions. Once we had a common basis of understanding, we were able to move into creating a shared vision for the downtown."

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Cathedral City Creates A Downtown

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downtown, it was a logical place to put it, since the downtown offered the amenities, services and parking necessary for both students and faculty. Both the City and the developer were flexible enough to accommodate the needs of the University and thus the partnership was successful. "This is a very exciting opportunity for Cathedral City," says Fred Bell, CEO for Entertainment Leaders Inc., the builder/operator of the Imax Theater that will contain the UCR campus. "It gives the balance we need for downtown."

■ Public-Private Investment

Cathedral City understood the necessity of "priming the pump" for private investment with a substantial public investment. The City undertook all of the planning and designing for

Reasons for Success

the new downtown at its own expense. Then, demonstrating its commitment to implementing the Vision, the City acquired approximately 20 acres in the downtown, and even underwrote the initial investment for the project.

By taking a series of very visible first steps, the City was able to leverage its money for increased public benefit. By building its Civic Center in the heart of downtown, it got double value for its investment by providing an anchor tenant for downtown at the same time it was providing much needed facilities for city operations. Similarly, the City was able to use \$9.5 million of



regional transportation funds to redevelop Palm Canyon Drive to improve regional traffic flow while at the same time creating a pedestrian-friendly street that is compatible with adjacent downtown development. These "double benefits" were a key part of the success of a project that thus far has attracted over \$40 million of private investment into downtown.

■ Perseverance

City leaders demonstrated remarkable perseverance by refusing to abandon the Vision in the face of substantial obstacles that included, at the top of the list, lack of money and Caltrans. "Had someone told us at the beginning of the project that we were going to attract \$40 million in private investment into a part of town where no one wanted to be, and change California law so that we could redesign a State Highway into a pedestrian- and transit-friendly grand boulevard, no one would have believed it," says former City Manager Bruce

Liedstrand. "But now, six years later, that is exactly what we have done. And we have done so with the full support of the Council, the staff, the Downtown Task Force, the private sector, and the general public — all of us believe in the Vision.

It is amazing how the strength of a clear and powerful vision literally changes decision-making and makes things that seem not even remotely possible, possible."

PROFILE CREDITS

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